

# Reflective Journal Writing as an Effective Tool to Promote Experiential Learning and Critical Thinking in Students of Higher Education

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**Abstract:** ***Purpose:** The researchers planned to study the application of Kolb's theory of experiential learning which students of post-graduation course in English literature, learn as a part of their syllabus in Linguistics paper. **Methodology:** In the present study, a sample of 20 students is taken. After they learn Kolb's theory and complete the questionnaire designed by Kolb, students are asked to reflect on their journey from undergraduate to postgraduate course and how the study of literature has impacted their life. **Findings:** This study indicates that RJW has a huge potential as a practical approach to enhance students' learning experience in general, and in particular, provide opportunities to link experiential learning to literature and life. **Originality:** This paper is result of the action research conducted in the classroom by the researcher. Analysis of samples of the reflective journals written by the students form the basis of the findings.*

**Keywords:** Reflective Journal, Experiential Learning, Critical thinking skills

## 1. Introduction

In the era of globalisation and privatisation, higher education in India is undergoing a tremendous change on par with the global education reforms. At the national level, NEP 2020 emphasizes that students of higher education must track their journey of learning to gauge how the process of learning has impacted their thinking skills. NEP also proposed reforms in curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation in higher education to promote experiential learning. Alternative assessment methods such as recordings, checklists, diaries, portfolios, student debriefings, peer conferences and reflective journal writing are necessary to promote experiential learning. Writing reflective journals, journal logs, Portfolios has become an evolving trend in the higher education scenario across the world.

One of the active learning methods designed to promote experiential learning and critical thinking skills is the Reflective journal. It is a vehicle for reflection (Moon, 2006). Reflective Journals are defined as "written documents that students create as they think about various concepts, events, or interactions over a period of time for the purposes of gaining insights into self - awareness and learning" (Thorpe, 2004, p.328). Journal writing helps students understand the process of learning and gives a voice to those who are not good at expressing themselves orally. Finally, because reflective journal writing requires active participation, the students take ownership of their learning (Boud, 2001; Hettich, 1990).

RJW has a huge potential as a practical approach to enhancing students learning experience in general, and, specifically, it may also provide opportunities to link theory and practice in language and literature courses. The objective of this research is to describe the power of

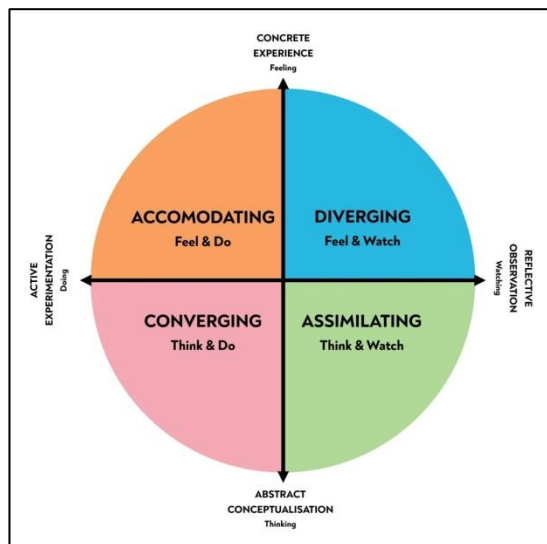
reflective journal writing in communicating ideas and how it aids in understanding the process of learning by students of higher education.

## 2. Theoretical Support

Kolb's theory focuses on the learner's personal development and perspective. Unlike the conventional, didactic method, the learner is responsible to guide his learning process in experiential learning. Experiential learning is a great way to learn because it allows students to apply knowledge in real life situations by encouraging active participation, critical thinking, creativity, problem solving, collaboration, and communication skills. According to Kolb's theory of experiential learning, "Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience." (Kolb, 1984, p.38). This model emphasizes a need for learner involvement in all educational activities and addresses the concept of how experience makes learning meaningful.

David Kolb proposed that people's learning styles, depend upon their life experiences, genetics, and the demands of the present times. According to Kolb, a learner goes up to the spiral of immediate experience which results in reflections and observations of the experience. These reflections are then linked and absorbed with past knowledge and translated into theories or abstract ideas, which leads to actions and new ways to adjust to the experience that can be explored and tested. The Kolb Learning Cycle is a pedagogical approach or model of human learning developed by David Kolb. He used this model to teach his students at Stanford University. His goal was to help them learn better through self - directed study.

Kolb (1984) believes that experiential learning is a vital aspect in engaging the learners. According to him, "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience". Kolb outlined a four - stage model that leads to effective learning: (a) concrete experience, (b) reflective observation, (c) abstract conceptualization, and (d) active experimentation. It is a cyclical model of learning where learners may begin at any stage and then follow the sequence.



Reflective journal writing can promote learning through Kolb's four stages, where the learners actively experience certain activities such as a journal, where they talk about a specific experience in stage one and reflect back on that experience in stage two. In the third stage, learners think and try to explore explanations regarding the meaning of the experience. Finally, in stage four, learners try to use their experiences, make connections with the new information to make decisions and solve problems resulting in better interpretations, or understandings of their experiences. Writing a reflective journal necessitated their ability to reformulate thoughts, provide details, and solve problems. Furthermore it involves critical thinking, metacognitive skills, and self - reflection. As the term implies, reflective journal writing is like a mirror, giving students an opportunity to look at their developing self.

### 3. Methodology

A Sample of 20 PG final year students of English literature are considered for this action research. Students are taught Kolb's theory of experiential learning and based on their understanding of the theory; some guidelines are also given about writing a reflective journal. Students are asked to reflect on their journey from undergraduate to postgraduate course and how the study of literature has impacted their life. From this group the researcher selected five samples at random and analyzed them. Since it is a qualitative analysis, only the key aspects of the journals are highlighted.

Guidelines given to students

- 1) Write as though you are talking to yourself or a close friend.
- 2) Make connections to other ideas, personal experiences, other courses, and reading.

- 3) Try new ways of saying things. Find ways to discuss what you are and what you learned.
- 4) Follow your thoughts and keep extending them, reflecting on what you have thought and how you are presenting them.

### 4. Analysis of Samples

The analysis of the samples focused mainly on the nature of reflection and contemplation of ideas and thoughts expressed by the students. Changes in perspectives related to academics, life, motivation, achieving goals, lifelong learning, feelings, personality aspects and a range view on life and learning can be observed in their writing. The complicated and complex data encountered by students and the experiences related to meeting people, create a personal connection and motivation in writing a reflective journal. They are able to understand that this activity is useful to make an estimate of their understanding life in the context of their pursuit of knowledge and building a career. Some excerpts are presented here.

#### Sample - 1

The contemplation on self - discovery in personal and spiritual domains is considered as a transformative experience linked to academics. Interest in planets and space and environment is experienced as a beauty of impermanence. Challenges are accepted as opportunities to refine personal growth. Reflection is the key to this change in perspective. People and feelings are more important than material objects.

#### Reflective journal

Embarking on the journey from my undergraduate degree to postgraduate studies has been a profound and transformative experience. I have evolved in various ways, especially in the spiritual realm. In the realm of spirituality, I found myself delving deeper into self-discovery. This period of academic growth became a canvas for understanding the interconnectedness of my personal and spiritual dimensions.

Learning English not just as a language but as a tool for communication and expression. English has been my favourite subject since childhood, but I never thought I would pursue English literature for both my graduation and post-graduation studies. I have lost interest in watching Telugu movies, but I'm more into sci-fi English series, and they also help me in learning English.

My interest in planets, space and black holes has become elevated. I have also learned about the importance of our environment through the paper on environment and literature. Nature became a silent mentor, teaching me the beauty of impermanence and the importance of embracing change.



Attitude, aptitude and perspective underwent a transformation during the academic journey. Facing obstacles has been ~~excitable~~ crucial for personal growth. Each challenge, whether academic or personal, has been an opportunity to refine my character and foster a growth mindset.

Reflecting on my past, many things have changed. I've gained knowledge about various subjects compared to my earlier self. Now, I view life from a different perspective, feeling more mature and understanding. I have come to realize that people and emotions hold greater importance than material things in this world.

As I consider how these experiences apply to my future, the skills acquired during my academics and the life lessons learned, along with an appreciation for nature, have laid a strong foundation. I need to explore more for myself, and the knowledge gained will be beneficial in the future.

- By  
T. Pallavi  
105122009011

As I was shy and an introvert I usually find it hard to communicate with people. But when I joined Anvesha Degree & PG College, I started communicating more and pushed myself out of my comfort zone. Even if I speak to only few people, and only few lines a day, I still feel that it will gradually improve and the only way to communicate better and more is by speaking more no matter how mundane and basic the talks are.

Even in my class, I find it difficult to communicate and understand what my classmates are ~~saying~~ talking about. Because of the language barrier as I am the only one who does not understand or speak Telugu language. So they translate it for me when asked about important things.

So this year I want to focus and improve my English both oral and written and also because now I'm doing Masters in English Literature, I need to be good at what I am doing.

**Sample - 2**

The realization of understanding one's drawbacks is a revelation in itself. Personal qualities like shyness and introvert nature can be overcome by breaking the language or communication barriers and personal reservations. Promising to oneself to do better is in itself is a ground breaking effort in improving communication skills.

**Sample - 3**

Developing maturity levels in personal and cultural domains has been a challenge. Literature has taught many things about life and society around me. Trying to establish a link between academics and life and the new situation leads to reflection and introspection as a process in thinking.

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Reflective Journal Write-up

I have always felt I excel in written communication. The skill of effectively communicating my thoughts and feelings through words and expressions written on paper and online was much easier than speaking about it orally. However, I did not realize how much my writing was lacking until my thoughts and feelings on writing were tested for the job role of content writer where you need to be creative, imaginative, original and that should be shown in writing.

It was a very difficult task for me and I realized many things during that one interview. I was already confident about my writing skills until that moment I also lack in oral communication which I realized during a job interview two years back. At that point, I promised myself that I will improve my skills, speak efficiently on any given topic.

R. HARISH  
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Reflective Journal writing

This journal is about my past one and half years of PG life. I am mentioning here the things I learned, the challenges, the knowledge and etc.

I have learned lots of new things in the last one and a half years, like developing my maturity level, knowledge on subject, more general knowledge and mainly I learned or learning a new language and came to know new culture and people which is totally different from me. These things encouraged me to develop more and shape my character as well.

If I look about the challenges speed in last one and a half years means, I don't think, it was been or being a challenge for me. Because, everyday is a good and new day in life, so there is no challenge in any few particular period of time. It totally depends upon how we analyse and work in every situation.

Of course, I am able to link both knowledge and learning with present time, both in practical and theoretically, also in everyday



life routine. For example, the education which I learned in my schooling, intermediate and PG are helping here to do more better in my academics and in common life which the experience I gained in my life helps to manage and rectify my activities were necessary.

Obviously, the things which I learned will not be enough to lead a successful life. Because, life is all about learning and where ever there is ups and downs I will be able to use my learned skills and managed them to fulfill things. The more I learned for last 1 and half years was speaking in more in English with everyone except home which became a habit and make to think in same.

In the case of impact, which makes me to think for my life as well for others to live and do things for everyone with learned things in academics wise I got to know more about life and how to live, my literature taught. Practically where I see new people for last more than a year helps me to think for betterment of society more.

good life to my children, for that I should be little financially independent, I can't may them to stop at any point, they should not suffer. how I suffered in this past years.. I learned so many things, My patience when I suffered make me to realize the things happened. A bit I have allitude courage, but still I am ready to learn again and again. I started my post graduate I choose a M.A English course which is not at all related to my subject but I need to complete, My Pg So I choose this. after joining the course, all my perspectives completely changed. These so much to learned in the advance generation. Life long learning is the continuous pursuit of knowledge and skills throughout life, whether for personal/professional life. I faced so many challenges in my personal life and my academics wise but even though I never stepped back because I am running with the present generation so I would like to develop my knowledge by transforming my skills into this advanced generation. And I know I definitely succeed and I conquer my success in my goal. I don't had to be great to start, but I have to start to be great.

**Sample - 4**

Life begins at the end of your comfort zone. Realizing the value of time and priorities is the first step to achieve one's dreams. Life is not about reaching a destination but rather enjoying the journey. Setting and achieving goals requires continuous effort and change in perspectives. Lifelong learning is a continuous pursuit.

Reflective Journal Writing  
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Life begins at the end of our comfort zone. Time is something we can never get back and it is something that we all have an equal amount of, I have learned how I spend our time it just as important as how much time I have. Spend my time doing things that brings family joy, make them happy, and help them to grow. I been sacrificing past eight years but I never give up on a dream just because of the time it will take to accomplish it. I freshly started my career again. I learned is that life is not about reaching a final destination but rather enjoying life journey. I've have come to understand that the purpose of life is to learn, grow and experience as much as possible. My life has changed after my marriage, -no career plan- stopped dreaming about my education. But now its completely changed, because I started dreaming to give

**Sample - 5**

Time management skills, self - discipline and constant effort are essential to pursue higher education. Intellectual growth through collaborative efforts and networking with friends is crucial for academics leading to self - directed learning. Interaction with classmates helps understand the unique perspective of each individual about learning and life. Self - motivation leads accountability and reflection in various learning situations. This helped in enhancing adaptability and flexibility. Reflective journal writing is an enjoyable and engaging learning experience and useful for career.

\* REFLECTIVE JOURNAL WRITING  
 G. Akshitha

This Reflective Journal writing paper aims to critically analyse my personal values and experiences that have influenced the Educational Journey from undergraduate to Postgraduate Studies.

I learned during the Transitioning from undergraduate to Postgraduate (PG) studies has been an exciting and transformative journey for me. As I embarked on this new phase of my education, I was filled with a mix of excitement, curiosity, & hint of nervousness. Looking back, I can now reflect upon the significant changes that student life underwent during this transition. In my post-graduation M.A English course work become more specialized, research-oriented & demanding the depth of knowledge required and the pace of learning were considerably student. This shift challenged me to adapt my study habits, enhance my time management skills, & develop a more disciplined approach to my work and also I learned increased workload and higher academic expectations.

During the last UG to PG, I gain a whole new level of knowledge and expertise in our chosen field. In UG I get a broad understanding of various subjects, while in PG I am interested & focus on a specific area in M.A English course. It is dive deep into advanced



theories, research methodologies, and practical applications and I am also get to work closely with my Professors & Experts in my course which helps to develop critical thinking, Problem-solving & research skills. It's an exciting journey of intellectual growth & specialization.

The workload in Postgraduation is considerably heavier, and the Expectations are higher. The adjustment to this new level of academic intensity was a major challenge for me. Postgraduate life requires adaptation on the personal front. Building new relationship with Professors and friends is crucial for networking and collaborative opportunities. Initially, I struggled with self-doubt, questioning if I was on par with my standard ones (to friends) or if I could contribute meaningfully to class discussions. Finally I recognized that every one brings unique perspectives & experience to this period. So, embracing my own voice & learning from others insight became an invaluable lesson.

my present knowledge and previous knowledge helps to deepen to my understanding & it helps to (devel) develop new challenges & expertise in specific area of my ambitions & goals. I noticed that my Post-graduation life is the increased level of independence and self-directed learning.

unlike in UG studies, I learned only clear guide-lines for assignments, projects, seminars and assessments. But in PG life knowledge requires a higher degree of self-motivation & confidence. The responsibility lies on me to identify and delve into literature & take ownership of learning journey.

I am really excited to use my learning knowledge in the future & in new situation. I believe that knowledge is a powerful tool that can help us navigate various aspects of life. my learning is very useful in future because I am learning M.A English course it is very demanding in future and it is very beneficial and improve my vocabulary and communication skills. so it is very useful to my future career and my learning will allow me to adopt & grow.

The knowledge and skills acquired during my transition from undergraduate to postgraduate life will undoubtedly benefit me in the future. firstly, the independence & self-motivation developed during PG studies will be instrumental in approaching my future endeavors. the ability to set goals, manage time effectively and take initiative is applicable in both personal & professional spheres. Additionally, the critical thinking & analytical skills honed in Postgraduate studies will prove (and) invaluable in (tackling) complex problems & making informed decisions.

## 5. Findings

Findings from this study illustrate the use of reflective journal writing as an effective pedagogical strategy for students of higher education in understanding their perspective and style of learning. Since this is the first experience of reflective journal writing for the students, it moved from description to reflection. This study indicates that RJW has a huge potential as a practical approach to enhance students' learning experience in general, and in particular, provide opportunities to link experiential learning to literature and life. Many students feel that RJW has been a thrilling experience and helpful to understand their personality and life.

## 6. Conclusion

Reflective journal writing is a modern and useful tool for students to express their self - discovery and self - improvement in order to amplify their learning practice quality. It is a tool for interpreting, communicating, and experimenting with new ideas. The researchers opine that if RJW is used as a tool of evaluation in higher education it will create a great impact and transform the arena of teaching - learning to make it a more meaningful endeavour. Many universities in the west have already employed RJW as an effective tool for evaluation. Reflective Journal writing can become one of the most important components of the assessment process or an alternative assessment process in higher education in India.

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